

GETTING THE RIGHT REFERENCES

They might not be necessary on a resume, but they make all the difference when getting hired.

by Barbra Lewis

"References available upon request."

The good news about references is that automatically including them with a resume is no more an expectation these days than it is to include your photo. The bad news is, as most of us casually throw the above phrase at the bottom of our resumes, or we leave it off altogether, we don't give nearly as much thought to our references as we do the resume itself.



But suddenly a potential employer wants to check your references. Not a problem if you've got a perfect record, but few of us ever feel completely comfortable with this. After all, there will be some sort of conversation or writing going on, about *you*, away from your presence. Just what do references do for you, and how do you go about collecting good ones?

"First and foremost, references are used to verify someone's work history," says Dr. James Sampson, career counselor and professor in the Department of Human Services and Studies at Florida State University. "People aren't always honest."

"Second, references are used to gain some idea of a candidate's skills, work habits, communication abilities and motivation."

When gathering references, you want to keep in mind people who will reflect you well in these capacities. If you are concerned that past employers won't help your case, you might want to turn to academic or training references, and character references.

As a general rule, you must include your former employer. If you left under bad circumstances, or were fired, you still need to provide your former supervisor's name. Leaving it off is a serious error, says Sampson.

"If your potential boss calls the references you *do* provide, and realizes there is no one who can speak for your work the last six months, then you've got a problem. Or, if you're filling out an application and "conveniently forget" to mention the supervisor of your last job, your new employer may discover this later. If your application is not accurate, you can then be fired immediately, regardless of your performance, and no court is going to back you."

The best policy is to be honest with your potential employer, and explain why you left a recent job. If you can show what you've learned from the experience, and that you can apply it to *this* job, you will be more likely to win points for your candor.

An academic reference could be a college professor or someone under whom you trained to

learn a certain skill.

A character reference is also acceptable. A mentor, minister or other respected peer could provide a strong character reference.

Since three is a standard number for references, one former employer, one academic and one character reference is a good balance. But use your best judgement and provide names and information of the people who will represent you best.

In Richard Nelson Bolles' employment bible, "What Color Is Your Parachute?", he writes, "experts now estimate that one-third to one-half of all job hunters lie on their resumes. . . Now if you were an employer, how much faith would you put in a piece of paper where you know there are lies on one-third to one-half of them. Not much."

With resume credibility slipping, references become that much more important. You want a stellar, and honest, resume, as well as people who can support that. Employers take references seriously. You should, too.

References Do's and Don'ts

Do

- Make sure anyone you use as a reference will GOOD things about you.
- Contact them in advance and ask them if they're willing to be called by employers as a reference for you. Only use them if they sound very willing to do it.
- Refresh their memories regarding the position you held or the activity you were involved in and the skills it entailed.
- Choose people to be your references that are familiar with your character, your work habits and are themselves good employees (or employers).
- Discuss with them what they'll say about your strengths and weaknesses.
- Make sure all contact information on your reference list is current.
- Once you land the new job, call your references and let them know. Thank them and offer your services to them as a reference in the future.

Don't

- List someone as a reference without getting their prior approval.
- Leave out any crucial information (such as the current phone number) needed to contact them.
- Use someone as a reference you think may not be able or willing to honestly give you a good reference.
- Overlook people you've volunteered with or gotten to know through non-work projects you've done.